

Georgia passes the 'law on agents', the internal crisis escalates

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Defying the recent mass street protests, on 14 May the Georgian parliament passed the law entitled 'On the transparency of foreign influence', commonly referred to as the 'law on foreign agents', in its third and final reading. In the 150-member chamber, 84 deputies voted in favour of it, including all the MPs of the ruling majority from the Georgian Dream (GD) party and all the MPs of a small grouping called People's Power. The legislation must be sent to President Salome Zourabichvili within ten days, and she has already announced that she will veto it (she has two weeks to make a decision). However, the parliamentary majority is in a position to override her veto. The law should come into force in mid-June. Should the president persist in her refusal to sign it, the speaker of parliament will put his signature to it. The law contradicts the legislation of the European Union, which Georgia is officially bidding to join; therefore, it has drawn very harsh criticism from the EU and individual Western countries, including the US. The White House press secretary said that if it eventually goes into effect, Washington could "fundamentally reassess" its relationship with Georgia. In contrast, Russian officials have said that the passage of this legislation demonstrates the Georgian government's independence and far-sightedness.

Commentary

- The Georgians protesting in the streets and also representatives of Western countries and structures believe that the 'law on foreign agents' is aimed against independent media organisations and NGOs. It resembles the legal solutions that the Russian Federation adopted over a decade ago to virtually dismantle its civil society institutions; however, the Georgian government maintains that its only concern is financial transparency. The legislation requires any entity that receives more than 20% of its funding from abroad to register as 'pursuing foreign interests'. Demonstrations against the law have been ongoing since mid-April, when it was brought before parliament. Tens of thousands of people have been gathering in Tbilisi every day. On Saturday, 11 May, the number of protesters certainly exceeded 100,000 (Georgia's population is around 3.5 million); smaller rallies have also been held in other cities. The protests have been apolitical (they have not been organised by any political parties) and networked, meaning that no one has emerged to represent the protesters, neither individual leaders nor a committee. Information about the meeting places and the direction of marches on particular days is shared on social networks. The demonstrations will continue in the coming days. The protesters could try to blockade government buildings and major

transport routes in the capital.

- The Georgian government has demonstrated its determination by pushing through the controversial legislation despite the protests and harsh criticism from the West. It is certainly aware that, if the law comes into force, it would end any prospect of the country joining the EU (although this goal is enshrined in Georgia's constitution) and Western countries could impose sanctions on leading Georgian politicians. However, this has not dissuaded them from their anti-Western rhetoric, which increasingly resembles Russia's narrative, with accusations that the West is meddling in the country's internal affairs, preparing a revolution, and so on. The GD's leader, billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, refused to meet with James O'Brien, US Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia, who paid a visit to Tbilisi; instead, O'Brien was received by Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze. The scale of the anti-Western statements by the GD's officials has moved beyond the logic of 'pragmatic bidding' or increasing the room for manoeuvre. This rhetoric has also been consistent with the years-long process of turning away from the West, which has been particularly pronounced since the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine (see '[Between Brussels and Moscow. Georgia is moving closer to Russia](#)').
- The Georgian government's actions, which have been driven by the desire to increase its control over the country and to constrain the Western-orientated independent circles, may also stem from a deliberate decision to reorient the country's foreign policy and draw it closer to Russia. Indirect evidence of this may be seen in statements made by Russian politicians, including Grigory Karasin, a former deputy foreign minister who now heads the committee on foreign affairs of Russia's Federation Council. He has hailed the passage of the 'law on foreign agents' as a sign of the independence of the Georgian government, which "showed character" by refusing to bow to Western pressure. Even though the two countries have not had diplomatic relations since Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia and its recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, their economic relations have been developing rapidly. Flights between the two countries resumed in May 2023. Moreover, Georgia has opted not to join the EU and US sanctions against Russia, though it has also not violated them.
- In the coming days, the government could move to crack down on the protests and use force on a larger scale, but it is more likely to adopt a wait-and-see tactic: dragging out the legislative process so that the protests fade away naturally as students, who make up a large proportion of the demonstrators, are about to start their summer holidays. During further work on the law after the president's expected veto, the GD may introduce amendments to slightly soften its repressive nature; Prime Minister Kobakhidze has already hinted at this. The Ombudsman has also expressed criticism, pointing out that the legislation in its current form violates regulations on the protection of personal data. The most immediate consequence of the law's passage is the announcement by opposition MPs that they will boycott parliamentary proceedings. This situation may continue until the end of the legislature's current term, as parliamentary elections are scheduled to take place in late October. However, the government could call a snap election in a bid to renew its legitimacy. As the opposition remains fragmented, polls are giving the ruling party a good chance of scoring its fourth consecutive victory, while its domination in the media (reinforced by the controversial law) provides ample

opportunities for managing public emotions.